

# SCI



## AUTONOMIC DYSREFLEXIA (AD)

### SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

- High blood pressure – an increase of 20 to 40 mmHg higher than your usual blood pressure (e.g. normal 120/80, now it has become 160/90)
- Severe, throbbing or pounding headache
- Decreased heartrate
- Blurred & spotty vision
- Goosebumps
- Sweating
- Flushing or redness of the skin above your level of injury; mainly on the neck and/or chest
- Nasal congestion
- Anxiety

### TAKE IT SERIOUSLY!

**AD is considered a medical emergency and should be taken seriously. If not treated, high blood pressure can cause a stroke or heart attack.**

### WHAT IS AUTONOMIC DYSREFLEXIA?

Autonomic Dysreflexia (AD) is a complication that may occur in those with Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) above thoracic level six (T-6). AD can be mild or it can be a life threatening medical emergency. For this reason, it is very important for you to be able to identify this complication as soon as it occurs, know what causes it, what to do to correct it, and how to prevent it.

### CAUSES

AD is an abnormal reaction that can occur when there is pain or other stimulation below the level of injury. The communication between the stimulus and your brain is blocked causing your body to recognize that something is wrong where you don't have feeling. As a result, warning signs such as sudden headache, high blood pressure, flushing, sweating, and/or anxiety may occur.

Listed are causes of AD:

- **Bladder** – full bladder, Urinary Tract Infection (UTI), bladder stones
- **Bowel** – stool impaction, irritation with bowel program
- **Skin** – ingrown toenails, pressure injury, burns (including sunburns)
- **Pain & Discomfort** – pressure on the testicles, tight clothes or shoes, menstrual cramps, pressure against the body from other sources (e.g. accidentally sitting on top of your cell phone or bumping a wall with your toes while in your chair)
- **Temperature** – difficulty with temperature changes

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### PREVENTION IS KEY!

- Understand your injury and sign and symptoms of AD
- Make sure your bladder is managed well
- Keep a regular bowel care regimen avoiding constipation
- Avoid tight clothing and tight shoes
- Avoid exposure to extreme temperature swings

### CAREFUL!

**If you are a male and have taken erectile dysfunction medications (Viagra, Cialis, or Levitra) within the last 24 hours and need to be treated with Nitro-paste, make sure your Provider is aware!**

### WHAT YOU NEED TO DO

***\*Reference your Autonomic Dysreflexia (AD) card. If you have not received one yet, ask your nurse.***

1. Sit up, if you are lying down or reclined. (This will help bring your blood pressure down.)
2. If you are wearing an abdominal binder or (TED) elastic stockings, remove them. Loosen or take off any tight clothing or shoes.
3. Check your bladder.
  - a. Make sure your indwelling catheter is draining and that the tubing is not kinked and the collection device is not full. If your catheter is clogged, irrigate or seek medical attention.
  - b. Empty bladder using your specific bladder management program.
4. Check your rectum for stool. If there is stool in your rectum evacuate using numbing jelly monitoring blood pressure closely. (If blood pressure remains elevated seek medical attention.)
5. Look for any skin problems, such as cuts, bruises, sores, injury or ingrown toenails.
6. Check for body discomfort/pain. You may need to reposition or look for items underneath you.
7. If your symptoms continue you will need medical treatment. Go to the Emergency Room immediately, this is a medical emergency.
8. You must tell the medical personnel that you have a SCI and your problem is AD.